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EKPHRASTIC NARRATIVE: A GENRE FOCALIZING IMAGE AND TEXT

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Just as photographs are both genuine and disingenuous depending upon how they are used so ekphrastic narrative as a process creates potential for a re-writing of an image and questioning its truth. An image can never be finalized because the writer takes on combined, recursive and recurring roles. These make a contribution to an understanding of the concept of ekphrasis known merely as an obscure literary genre. That an image in the written text is an image of an image, just as a photograph is an image of an image, then both, or either, are provisional in the process of being recontextualized, transmuted, or effaced. To what extent does the act of ekphrastic narrating construct fictional memoir as visual to verbal de-familiarizing re-memory? To explore these issues and answer this question, I will discuss how these roles are evidenced by the fictional memoir *Pictures on the Wall of my Life* and come to life in the fictional character of Lily Adams. From the many ancestral portraits in black and white that line the halls of her childhood home, Adams learns that what they embody is indeed not visually representative of a past she has been encouraged to believe in, but rather is now forced to question as the pictures speak to her of a world re-focused through their own lens. Readers are often more familiar with works of art as paintings, or sketches, or large format art works than they are with photographs as inviting an ekphrastic narrative. However, a photograph without a companion narrative becomes a thing in its own separate cut-off space. We cannot clearly inhabit that space if we do not have a text to unlock the code enabling a visual to verbal transition.

Keywords: Image, Text, Ekphrastic narrative.

Introduction

James Agee writes: “Who are you who will read these words and study these photographs, and through what cause, by what chance and for what purpose, and by what right do you qualify to, and what will you do about it” (qtd. in Mitchell).

In responding to Agee’s exigency, photographs of my intersection with self and history are images that have a profound impact on the way I remember my past.



These images exist thankfully because of the photographs taken by my father (who made a career out of snapping the lives of others on film), who—by the way—is the inspiration for the character of Leonard in my fictional memoir—and by photographers whose identities have long been erased from the memory of my family members: my elderly mother or my aunts and other uncles, repositories of my family history, many of whom are now frail, in their early nineties, or dead. Collected and stored by my mother who never threw anything away—thousands of pictures stuffed in albums, in envelopes, in dressers, and in boxes are now in my possession. The best I could gather over the past three decades line the walls of my home. These images of family members and friends, some long dead, some still alive, intrigue me.

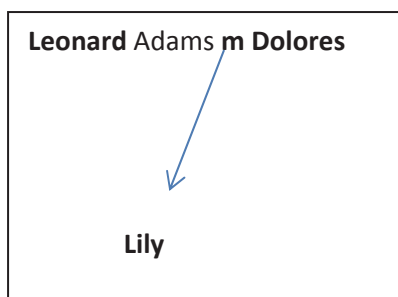
Through my fictional memoir *Pictures on the Wall of My Life*, Lily Adams, the protagonist, learns from the many ancestral portraits in black and white that line the halls of her childhood home (inspired by those same portraits that live in mine), that what they embody is indeed not visually representative of a past Adams has been encouraged to believe in, but rather is now forced to question as the pictures speak to her of a world re-focused through their own lens. These portraits render a new truth, through voices of their very own, challenging what Lily has been told about her family, how it's been told, and through what medium she has relied upon to accept it.

As I would with any work of art, I began asking myself a series of questions about the photographs, no differently than Lily Adams, the protagonist does:

- What did the choice of subject matter in the pictures tell about the relationship between what is represented and the idea of what is represented?
- What is the artist or creator telling the viewer about the emotions experienced at the time by the photograph's composition and the choice of black and white?
- What does this photograph (or any photograph) suggest about the creator's perception of the subject's degree of importance?
- Is what is represented in this moment reality or perceived reality?



Pondering the answers to so many questions about my compendium of celluloid images, and their absence of words, led me to Marianne Hirsch's theoretical analysis of photographs that further led me to have many discussions with my mother the inspiration for the character of Dolores in the novel.



This resulted in supplying me with a medium as Hirsch or before her W.J. Thomas Mitchell calls them “imagetexts,” or prose picture. I prefer imagetexts. These allowed me to fill in what the pictures left out. I later found myself reflecting and analyzing the subjects in each photograph that Mother and I were in as Roland Barthes does in his own analysis of the portrait-photograph as a closed field of forces. He writes, “In front of the lens, I am at the same time: the one I think I am, the one I want others to think I am, the one the photographer thinks I am, and the one he makes use of to exhibit his art” (13). And as Barthes reflects, Mother and I became forces in our particular reflections of certain photographs, “who oppose and distort each other.” Existing within the field of opposition, for me, is ekphrasis—an act that hails the literary evocation of spatial art.

The act of ekphrasis, (derived from the Greek as in *ek* for “out” and *phrazein* for “declare” or “pronounce”) in effect is “to describe” or “to tell in full.” Lily Adams begins with a photograph and its implied declaration that it is telling “in full.” Or at least that is what she has been led to believe. But does it truly tell all in full by itself?

A photograph looks real, but as much as photography has been about depicting reality, it is also about the distortion or the deception of reality. And just what that reality depicts remains for the viewer to decide.

Interactive Conversations

So viewers/readers take a moment and look briefly at this photograph. Please tell me what is being depicted? What is happening in the photograph as you perceive it? Describe it.



Have you looked long enough or do you require another minute? Another minute, please take it.

So you say/see/think:

Oh, how romantic.

They are at a crossroads.

She is just thinking about another time.

He is wondering what comes next.

A boundary separates them and they want to breach it.

He is holding on to a fence and waiting.

Will he have to cross those mountains, he's thinking.

She wonders where he and what is beyond.

Do they really know one other?

Actually, this is one my family photographs that is an inspiration for one that Lily Adam's finds in the novel long after her parents' divorce. An excerpt below:

Following Leonard's departure, Dolores pretended like he'd never existed, but Lily knew that he had. There were very few photographs of him left hanging or on table tops, and there was an outline of one that used to be visible on the wall. Lily recalled that it was what Leonard called a double exposure and it had been her favorite. It captured Dolores and Leonard standing on either side of a fence with hills in the background. Each looks in opposite directions. He grasps a chain linked fence that sits on top of a concrete barrier with his right hand as he puffs on his signature pipe. His shirt with flap pockets on either side is unbuttoned exposing a bit of his t-shirt. Dolores is wearing a light soft linen dress with Juliette sleeves bolstered by small shoulder pads making her shoulders seem broader than they are. The folds of fresh-pressed linen softens the outlines of her breasts. Around her neck is a large gold choker of squared chain links intertwined with coral. Lily remembered that coral necklace as salmon in color, because once when she played with it as a child and the strand broke, Lily had to scurry to gather all the pieces up from the floor before her cat, Pancho, thought they were play toys. Then she put the necklace parts back in Dolores's drawer and pretended ignorance when Dolores asked about it.

Dolores is resting her right arm against the concrete barrier portion of the fence. Leonard's face appears hauntingly inside of Dolores's face. Or perhaps he lives within hers, but what is odd is that Dolores's face is twice the size of Leonard's. Did he plan it that way? He must have as he was far too professional for this photograph to be a mistake, unlike their marriage. Taking this photograph must have been Leonard's way of accepting the world as his camera recorded it. And yet their marriage proved that they, or perhaps just he, could not accept it as it looks in this romantic moment: each inhabiting the other's thoughts as if one could not live without the other. So where in this snap of the shutter moment does the truth lie? Then again what is the truth? Lily considered all the voices in her mother's home that provided a map for her to maneuver through her younger years—weren't they then part of this elusive truth?

Here is another family photograph that is an inspiration for one of the photos Lily sees in the novel after her mother has died. Again readers/viewers, as previously requested, please describe what do you see being depicted? What is happening, as you perceive it?



Take your time.
So you say/see/think:

She is about to clap for someone or something she likes.

He is directing her to clap for him.

He is really not looking at her.

She is looking up at the camera, not at him. It is some kind of optical illusion.

He is a fantasy.

She wants to leave.

He is tired and wearing his scarf because he is cold.

He wants her to fix her scarf because it has fallen.

She is just posing for a portrait for a professional photographer.

The light is too harsh. She does not like it. She is pretending.

He is trying to control her.

Actually this, too, is one my family photographs that is a further inspiration for one that Lily Adam's sees in the novel. Again, an excerpt below:

A black and white portrait of Dolores sitting on an antique sofa had been photographed by Leonard. In the picture, Dolores sits in the foreground in a strapless evening gown. "It was gold lame and I made it", she had announced proudly when Lily was much younger. A green scarf—"I made that too," Dolores would remind Lily—is draped around her and has fallen, leaving her shoulders bare. It lies in the crook of each bent arm. One hand rests upon the other, as if she is about to applaud someone or something. Her wedding ring is a band set against another with a stone, a diamond, maybe. Large earrings, gold flowers, adorn the elegance of her swept back chignon. Leonard is reflected in an elaborately carved wood and gold accented mirror behind her. His face is right next to the lens of his view camera. A scarf is draped over his neck. He squeezes the shutter button. A barrel spot light hovers above Dolores, showering light upon her chest and naked shoulders. Smooth, sleek, unequivocally soft. This image is Leonard's self-portrait of their marriage. A photo of himself shooting a portrait of Dolores on this Louis XVI Neoclassical French furniture. It might appear in Vanity Fair or Vogue, but it doesn't. It looks like something out of a film noir still photo, but it isn't. Dolores had told a younger Lily that it was their Christmas card photo. They look so refined. They are still very much in love in this still life moment. This is early in their marriage. Since the portrait hangs in Dolores's bedroom right next to her dressing table, Lily had not looked at it for a long time. She could barely bring herself to enter that room or look at the picture even now . . . so soon after her mother's death.

Conclusion

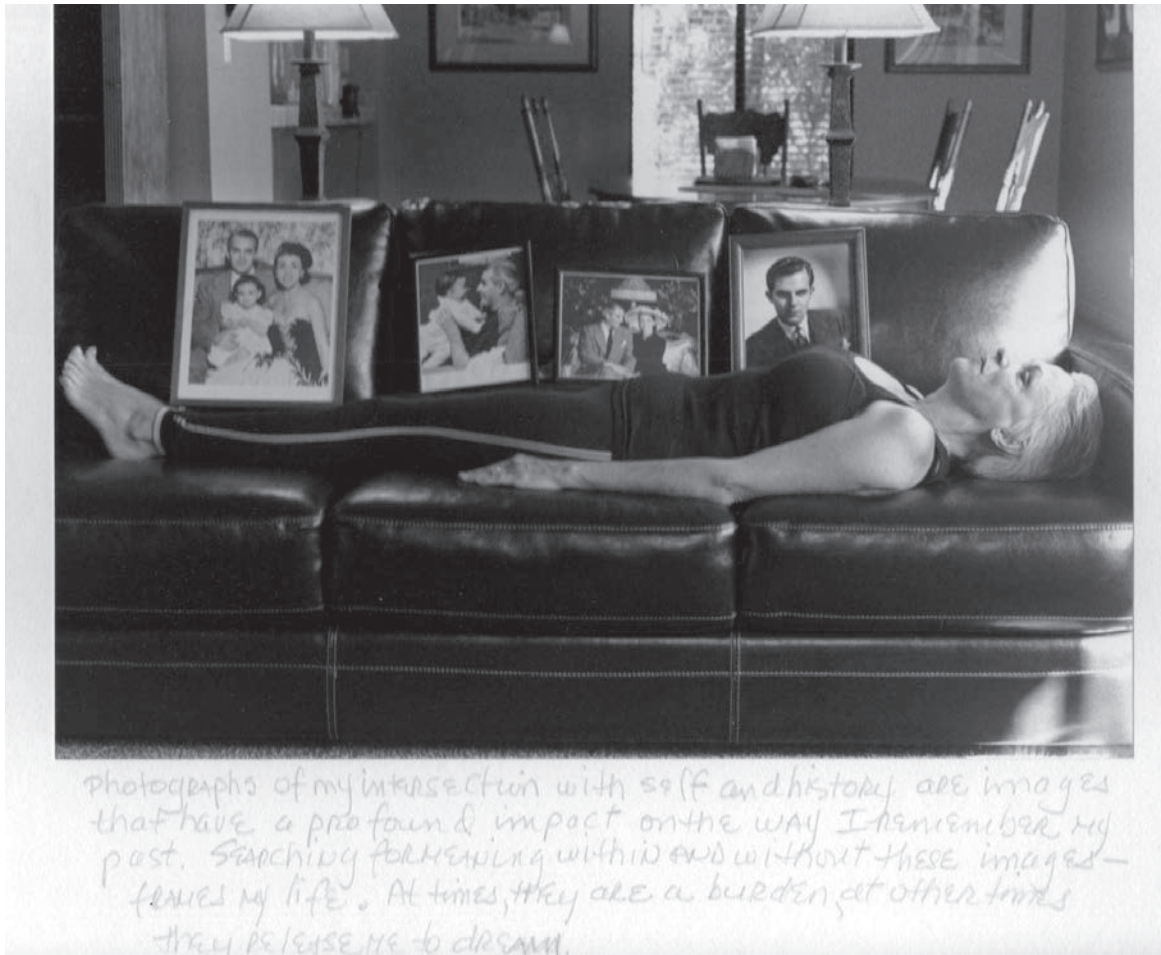
Now, I would like you to consider this quote from American photographer Sally Mann:

"When the good pictures come, we hope they tell truths, but truths "told slant," just as Emily Dickenson commanded. We are spinning a story of what it is to grow up. It is a complicated story and sometimes we try to take on the grand themes: anger, love, death, sensuality, and beauty. But we tell it all without fear and without shame.

Memory is the primary instrument, the inexhaustible nutrient source; these photographs open doors into the past but they also allow a look into the future" (11).

In effect, then, because of this interaction/conversation we have been having about the photographs and the conversation Lily is also having with them, I am compelled to reapply the

definition of ekphrasis to some of the most effective works of art—in this case photographs and their narrative complements—subsequently to be known as genuine works of art on works of art. Readers are often more familiar with works of art as paintings, or sketches, or large format art works than they are with photographs as exuding an ekphrastic narrative. However, one must agree that a photograph without a companion narrative becomes a thing in its own separate cut-off space. There is no coterminous world to be inhabited and it is this absence, which creates the imperative for *Pictures on the Wall of My Life*. We cannot clearly inhabit that space if we do not have a text to unlock the code enabling a visual to verbal transition.



So I leave you where I started: Photographs of my intersection with self and history are images that have a profound impact on the way I remember my past. Searching for meaning within and without these images frames my life. At times they are a burden, at other times they release me to dream.

References

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